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Wimmer, Lena Franziska (2011) The aesthetic paradox in processing fictional vs. non-fictional texts. In: Reading Mediated Minds: Empathy with Persons and Characters in Media and Art Works. Summer School Conducted at the CCCT, Amsterdam, July 2011, Amsterdam, Netherlands. (Unpublished)

DOI

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The aesthetic paradox in processing fictional vs. non-fictional texts

Lena Wimmer

***Reading Mediated Minds: Empathy with
Persons and Characters in Media and Art
Works***

**A CCCT Summer School
Amsterdam July 11-13 2011**



Theoretical background

- The aesthetic paradox (Wimmer et al., submitted; Christmann et al., submitted)
 - Aesthetic objects are related to positive experiences
 - The processing of aesthetic objects demands effort
 - Cognitive load during information processing leads to negative results
 - Tension between the appreciation of aesthetic objects and their strenuous processing
 - Solution: When adopting an aesthetic attitude, cognitive load is even appreciated



Research question

What effect has the adopted reception attitude on text Processing criteria?

- Hypothesis: Depending on the reception attitude (aesthetic vs. factual), different criteria for successful text processing are applied by recipients
 - Factual attitude: demand of precise and unambiguous comprising of information
 - Aesthetic attitude: claiming deep comprehension, processing on several dimensions



Methods

- Data collection: semi-standardized interview, corresponding field manual
- Data analysis: content analysis drawing on a set of categories for processing criteria
 - Main categories consisted of levels of evaluation (example: evaluation of textual quality)
 - Sub-categories indicated genre-specific occurrence of each main category (example: evaluation of language level vs. logical structure)



Preliminary studies

- Study 1
 - Activation of reception attitude:
Addressing of typical genre-related text features

Material: two text excerpts, one of them fictional (Bödl: Studie in Kristallbildung [Study on Crystallization]), one non-fictional (Peroni: Die magische Grenze [The Magic Frontier])

- Procedure
 - Read the text
 - Interview (incl. activation of reception attitude)



Preliminary studies

- Study 1
 - Results

Processing criteria \ Recep- tion attitude	Non- fictional	Fictional
Factual	8	26
Aesthetic	11	28

$\chi^2 = .206$; $df = 1$; n.s.

In both conditions fictional criteria more frequent than non-fictional ones!

Explanation: Activation of reception attitude failed



Preliminary studies

- Study 2

→ 3 different methods to induce a factual vs. aesthetic attitude

- Staff member of public library
- Review of the text
- Booth operator at a flea market

→ treatment check

Material: two text excerpts, one of them fictional (MacLean: Ice Station Zebra), one non-fictional (Krakauer: Into Thin Air)



Preliminary studies

- Study 2
 - Procedure
 - Induce reception attitude
 - Read the text
 - Treatment check
 - Results
 - Most effective method of induction: review of the text
 - Independent from method of induction: aesthetic variant more successful than factual variant
 - Explanation: non-fiction review too inexplicit → modification of review



Preliminary studies

- Study 2
 - Results for modified **non-fiction recension**:

	Fictional text	Non-fictional text	Sum
Not successful	6	7	13
Successful	1	2	3
Sum	7	9	16

→ Independent of text condition, participants were not convinced of the text being non-fictional!



Role of empathy

- Explanation:
 - Narrative text structure (→ text structure is critical)
 - i.e. there is a narrator the reader can identify with
 - Empathy in the sense of Davis' (1980) fantasy scale:

Tendency to imaginatively transpose oneself into fictional situations ("When I am reading an interesting story or novel, I imagine how I would feel if the events in the story were happening to me")



Role of empathy

- Resulting hypothesis:

Neither the reception attitude nor the text genre account for the aesthetic paradox, but the possibility to identify oneself with a narrator

- Prove required: presence of narrator facilitates text comprehension compared to texts without narrator



Main study

- Material
 - Both narrative texts from the previous study
 - Two non-narrative text excerpts, one of them fictional (Schätzing: The Swarm), one non-fictional (German Wikipedia article on Tsunamis)
- Procedure
 - Read the text
 - Write summary
 - Semi-standardized interview → reception attitude, processing criteria



Results

- Text structure → reception attitude

	Narrative structure	Non-narrative structure	Sum
Factual attitude	2	31	33
Aesthetic attitude	21	0	21
Sum	23	31	54

$\chi^2 = 46.316$; $df = 1$; $p = .000$

→ Highly significant effect of narrativity on reception attitude



Sum up and Discussion

- Conclusion
 - Narrative Texts are considered as typical fictional texts
 - Narrativity implies possible identifications with narrator
 - Hypothesis: Empathy as measured by the Fantasy Scale functions as intervening variable between textual features and processing
- Further Steps
 - Collection of empathy during reading narrative vs. non-narrative texts
 - Checking the possible role of other textual factors



Thank you very much for
your attention!

